

## **The Canaries of Democracy**

Imagining the Wandering Jew with Artist Rosabel  
Rosalind Kurth-Sofer

Rae Di Cicco and Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer  
Introduction by Thomas M. Messersmith

### **About the Authors**

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# The Canaries of Democracy

## Imagining the Wandering Jew with Artist Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer

Rae Di Cicco, Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, and  
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The work of artist Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer is, in essence, both destructive and constructive. It seeks to destroy the symbols of an historical antisemitic oppression while simultaneously allowing the artist to examine and construct new meanings for her own Jewish identity. Throughout the long history of Jews in Europe, antisemitic imagery has relied on representations of the Jew to define the self in opposition to the “Other” while reinforcing systems of oppression built on this process of othering. Caricatures and archetypes of the Jewish subject solidified this mythology in the collective consciousness of European Christians,

such that antisemitism became ubiquitous and banal while still retaining its sinister implications.<sup>1</sup> Through her series of drawings, titled *Exodus*, which enlists the very images of antisemitism that she seeks to reject, Kurth-Sofer engages in the history of Western European antisemitism by questioning what it means to be a Jew today and contesting this persistent semiotic mythology. In doing so, her work strips antisemitic imagery of any potential historical legitimacy so that it may be recognized as a system of hatred and oppression that can and should be dismantled.

While historians should be careful to avoid teleological notions of antisemitic ideology, the symbolisms of modern antisemitism nonetheless have their origins in early and medieval Christianity, stemming primarily from religious differences and the need to delineate morally correct behavior.<sup>2</sup> The trope of Jews as “Christ Killers” defined much of this antagonism, as early Christians saw Jews’ refusal to convert to Christianity as a perpetual act of deicide.<sup>3</sup> It was around the year 1000 that new images and mythologies of Jews began to spread throughout Europe.<sup>4</sup> Images depicted Jews as demonic, as the antichrist, or even as the devil

<sup>1</sup> “Mythology” here refers mainly to the work of Roland Barthes, who argues that a mythology is a system of symbols meant not to hide ideas but rather to discuss them openly so that they might be normalized, standardized, and rendered as a pure “statement of fact” rather than a contested ideology; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Historians such as Shulamit Volkov and, from an art historical perspective, Sara Lipton have discussed the dangers of such teleological thinking within the historiography, demonstrating that historians cannot and should not merely see the history of antisemitism as a long march from the medieval period to the Nazis, but rather should examine both its continuities and breaks in order to truly understand the historical reality surrounding it; Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 279; Shulamit Volkov, *Germans, Jews, and Antisemites: Trials in Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 67–81.

<sup>3</sup> Figures such as the “wandering Jew,” who was forced to wander the Earth after taunting Christ on the way to the Crucifixion became common tropes, and, for some, the diasporic nature of Jews after the death of Christ was itself a direct result of divine punishment for their refusal to convert. James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (New York: Atheneum, 1969); Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1943); Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 44–45.

<sup>4</sup> Lipton argues that it was at this time that images of the Jews as the “Other” became commonplace, facilitated in part by “an unprecedented economic, cultural, and religious awakening” in Western Europe. As such, Christian artists began to use symbols surrounding Jews and their dress to set them apart, though this was largely not an attempt to persecute the Jews, but rather to demonstrate correct practice of Christians (i.e., delineating what was Christian by marking what was not). As Jacqueline E. Jung

incarnate, both utilizing and creating an iconography that drew upon religious myths.<sup>5</sup> Images and stories of Jews desecrating the consecrated host became common cause for violence, as did the so-called blood libel, in which Jews were said to ritualistically kill Christians in order to use their blood in the preparation of matzah.<sup>6</sup> These stories fueled the stereotypes of the Jew as conspiratorial, iniquitous, and anti-Christian. At this time, physiognomy, which would define depictions of Jews in the modern era and features prominently in Kurth-Sofer's art, was merely one aspect of distinguishing Jews from non-Jews in art and imagery. Yet, while physiognomic symbols such as the so-called "Jewish nose" were present in Western European art, these depictions of physical features tended to be linked more to a perception of impure morality than indicative of an immutable ethnographic or racial trait passed on through Jewish blood.<sup>7</sup>

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many of the popular images of Jews as twisted, dark, and conspiratorial had solidified in the European consciousness. The position of the Catholic Church remained that Jews should be subjugated, isolated, and held in contempt, but the Pope stopped short of advocating direct violence.<sup>8</sup> The Jews' status as the Other could theoretically be reversed with conversion—in which case, Jews should be welcomed with open arms; however, it was rarely this simple.<sup>9</sup>

The rise of mass politics and mass media in the nineteenth century exacerbated and spread antisemitic imagery farther and with greater urgency. High-profile incidents such as the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) gave new life to older images of the "conspiratorial Jew," infusing this idea in European Christian minds with newer modern economic and racial ideas.<sup>10</sup>

shows in her analysis of the Naumburg West Choir Screen, portrayals of Jews in art could be used not just to demonize the Jews, but rather as a way to highlight the failings of Christians by "[turning] scrutiny back upon the self." Jacqueline E. Jung, "The Passion, the Jews, and the Crisis of the Individual on the Naumburg West Choir Screen," in *Beyond the Yellow Badge: Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism in Medieval and Early Modern Visual Culture*, ed. Mitchell B. Merback (Boston: Brill, 2008), 149; Lipton, *Dark Mirror*, 6–15.

<sup>5</sup> These symbols are discussed extensively throughout the works of Lipton and Trachtenberg; Lipton, *Dark Mirror*; Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*.

<sup>6</sup> Despite having no basis in scripture or reality (and the fact that consuming blood is against Jewish law), charges of "blood libel" would periodically resurface in Europe, sparking violence even into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. R. Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); Robert S. Wistrich, *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Lipton, *Dark Mirror*, 182–99.

<sup>8</sup> This policy had a long history in the Church, going as far back as Pope Gregory I in the sixth century; but as David I. Kerzer notes, though the Church did not call for direct violence, its policies nonetheless acted within a framework of antisemitism, making the distinction between antisemitism (i.e., discrimination of Jews based on race) and anti-Judaism (i.e., discrimination of Jews based on religion) difficult to maintain. David I. Kerzer, *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Theodore R. Weeks, *From Assimilation to Antisemitism: The "Jewish Question" in Poland, 1850-1914* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>10</sup> This famous political scandal concerned Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish artillery officer in the French army who was falsely accused of and imprisoned for treason. When it was discovered that someone else had, in fact, been spying, the cover-up led Emile Zola to write his famous open letter, "J'Accuse...!" throwing French society into turmoil. For an overview of the many complicated dimensions surrounding the Dreyfus Affair including fights about clericalism, economics, nationalism, and other areas that both informed and were informed by antisemitism, see Ruth Harris, *Dreyfus: Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

Antisemites increasingly saw Jews as both a product and a symptom of the worst aspects of modernity, inexorably linked to notions of capitalism and greed, and potentially working to undermine society for their own gains.<sup>11</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, new “racial science” shifted the way Jews were portrayed in popular culture.<sup>12</sup> Physical features became exaggerated, and the stereotypical “Jewish Nose,” which had been associated with corrupt religious morality in both Jews and non-Jews during the medieval era, became associated with specific Jewish racial features. In 1879, Wilhelm Marr popularized the term “antisemitism,” a word that exists in opposition to a nebulous idea of a “Semitic” race rather than being linked to any cultural, religious, or economic identity.<sup>13</sup>

The conception of Jewishness as a genetic racial trait passed on regardless of adherence to a particular religion made any effort by Jews to assimilate into society all the more difficult.<sup>14</sup> The markers of identity (the racial scientist would claim) would show that they had been and always would be “Jewish,” whether they practiced Judaism or not. The scientific racial discourse modified the mythology surrounding Jews, creating a new semiotic language to reinforce the old while reaping the advantages that came from the established tradition.

By the twentieth century, the concept of race merged with newer ideas about the nation and nationalism. At the end of World War I, the new order in Europe saw the breaking of older empires into states organized around the principle of national self-determination. While these polities were, in theory, nationally homogenous, in reality they contained multiple groups living within the same borders, causing great tension. In the Habsburg Monarchy, Jews had long

<sup>11</sup> The idea of the Jew as a greedy figure also has its roots in medieval depictions of Jews. Due to the prohibition against Christian money-handling and the need for Jews to keep their wealth in cash to aid in mobility during a crisis, Jews were often associated with lending money. This perception quickly shifted toward an association of Jews with usury and avarice. As Lipton shows, the image of the Jew in the early Middle Ages was almost intrinsically linked to that of moneybags. By the time of Dreyfus, infamous works such as the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” a fake text that supposedly details a secret meeting of Jewish leaders laying out their plans to take over the world’s economy, began to make their way around Europe, drawing on these older images, updating them for a modern Europe. Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible Moralisé* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Such “racial science” was, in actuality, a pseudo-science that attempted to use objective measurements in order to achieve subjective delineations of race, often ascribing pre-conceived values to these different measurements as a means of achieving social or cultural hegemony (e.g., white supremacy). A brief history of this pseudo-science and how it relates to the development of racial views in Europe can be found in Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippenmann, *The Racial State: Germany, 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23–43.

<sup>13</sup> Volkov, *Germans, Jews, and Antisemites*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Geraldine Heng argues quite convincingly that racial structures did, in fact, exist in the Middle Ages; however, these structures differed fundamentally from later “scientific racism.” It is certainly useful to recognize racial structures in the Middle Ages, as seeing race solely in the context of the nineteenth century’s biologically-defined racism merely perpetuates and, perhaps, legitimizes these modern structures by engaging the racist discourse on its own terms and, thus, obscuring the constructed nature of race itself. Nevertheless, Jews were afforded a degree of theoretical permeability within these medieval racial structures that was not possible within the biologically defined racial structures of the nineteenth century. In practice, of course, this permeability often broke down, especially when power over Christians was at stake, but the ambiguous nature of this racial identity (Heng classifies this as a “hybrid” or “queered” identity) nevertheless existed in this society in such a way that would not be possible within a biologically determined framework. Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 15–20, 27–33, 76–83.

enjoyed the ability to assimilate through their mutual identity as subjects of the emperor. However, with the collapse of Austria-Hungary, Jews were confronted with the pressures of exclusion in a newly nationalized Central Europe.<sup>15</sup>

After the rise of the National Socialism in Germany, the Nazi propaganda machine, under the direction of Joseph Goebbels, began vigorously disseminating the idea that Jews were inherently insidious and bent on taking over all aspects of society. Nazi speeches, writings, films, newspapers, posters, and diverse ephemera—such as the postcards mentioned by Kurth-Sofer in the following interview—proliferated Nazi representations of Jews. The longstanding myth of a Jewish conspiracy blended with racial pseudo-science, formulating grounds for blaming all Jews (as a broadly defined race rather than religious group) for perceived transgressions against non-Jews. While the physical imagery depicting Jews became more intense in Nazi propaganda—often exaggerating the facial features of Jews to an extreme degree—the primary concern to the Nazis remained the supposed Jewish conspiracy.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the ubiquity of antisemitic imagery in Nazi Germany continued to circulate within the German and broader European consciousness long after the Nazis had been defeated.

Antisemitic imagery today remains mostly within the same framework, borrowing from both racist Nazi propaganda and earlier conspiratorial notions of “world Jewry.”<sup>17</sup> Antisemitic groups continue to appeal to apocalyptic views of a Jewish conspiracy, utilizing the same semiotic lexicon to bury the hateful nature of their argument and normalize it within the old mythological framework. By intentionally engaging with this mythology, Kurth-Sofer appropriates these images, effectively subverting the visual tradition of oppression and violence—both real and symbolic—suffered by Jewish people for centuries.

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<sup>15</sup> It is significant to note that one of the successor states to the Habsburg Monarchy, Austria, is the country where Kurth-Sofer has conducted her work. Marsha L. Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria During World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> In fact, as Jeffrey Herf notes, the fear of conspiracy and the institution of the yellow star, which itself harkens back to medieval practices, belies the fact that facial features were not sufficient to distinguish Jews from non-Jews. Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 151.

<sup>17</sup> This idea continues to utilize the tropes found within the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” as discussed above. Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*.

## Interview

**Rae Di Cicco:** Rosabel, when we first connected over the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018, we shared the feeling of helplessness being so physically distant from the shooting while on Fulbright fellowships in Vienna, Austria.<sup>18</sup> Fulbright Austria funded you for a year of work with the Jewish Museum Vienna. What inspired you to work with the Jewish Museum's collections? Can you describe your initial vision for the project?

**Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer:** What initially inspired me was this spontaneous drive to reconnect with my Jewish identity when I was an undergraduate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I knew that I wanted to apply for a grant that would fund my art practice after graduation, so I was doing a lot of research on potential grant topics when I met a former professor for coffee. She had just gotten back from her sabbatical in Vienna and wanted to tell me about her travels. She told me about the Viennese cafes, and the Opera, and then she started telling me about her experience there as a Jewish woman. She had had a profound experience at the Jewish Museum's exhibition on antisemitism.<sup>19</sup> The objects were displayed facing a mirror in the back of the vitrines, so that that the viewer could see their own reflections alongside antisemitic objects. When she described the images on display, she seemed disgusted and captivated and inspired all at once, and recommended I visit someday. So, I went home and googled the exhibition. I learned that it was a part of the Martin Schläff Collection, and consequently I found myself in a black-hole of anti-Jewish manuscript paintings, *Der Stürmer* propaganda, and nineteenth-century political cartoons. I couldn't stop looking at the caricatures, largely because I had never seen anything like them before. I grew up in a majority Jewish community and rarely experienced antisemitism myself. I suddenly felt this urgency to do something with this rich history of image making; I felt it needed to be shared.

At the time, I was just beginning my self-portrait series. I was drawing my face on mundane objects and animals and claiming them as an extension of my own body. This was an exciting new direction for me, because while I was expanding the normative definition of the self, I could also express my own self-doubt in an empowered way. I was drawing my face on chickens, sunflowers, and tangerines. I thought they were funny, because they felt like role-playing and storytelling . . . like I was creating a mythology of my very own.

So, when I saw the anti-Jewish images for the first time, I was already interested in this Othered body. A body that is ambiguously animal but also so human and relatable. I started doing research on the history of antisemitism and started to re-acquaint myself with Judaic studies. And then I applied for the Fulbright grant. My initial vision for my project was a series of self-portraits. I thought that this idea of the half-human, half-other would be the most

<sup>18</sup> The Tree of Life synagogue shooting occurred during Shabbat morning service at the Tree of Life (L'Simcha) Congregation in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on October 27, 2018. White nationalist and antisemite Robert Gregory Bowers murdered eleven people and injured six others, making the Tree of Life synagogue shooting the deadliest act on record of domestic terrorism against Jews in the United States. Kurth-Sofer's mother grew up in Ambridge, Pennsylvania (where her father was a rabbi) and attended Yeshiva Acheitemimimnechamaminsky School and Hillel Academy in Squirrel Hill. Di Cicco has been a resident of Pittsburgh since 2013 and is pursuing her PhD in the History of Art and Architecture Department at the University of Pittsburgh.

<sup>19</sup> The antisemitic objects on display at the Jewish Museum Vienna are included in the permanent exhibition, "Vienna and the World: Our Visible Storage," at the Dorotheergasse location. The antisemitic objects entered the collection of the Jewish Museum in 1993, when collector Martin Schläff donated around five thousand objects of antisemitism in order to make the objects and documents available for research. Schläff began collecting such objects to to remove them from the market and thus from antisemitic collectors. For more information, see "The Schläff Collection," Jewish Museum Vienna, accessed July 9, 2019, <http://www.jmw.at/en/collections/schlaeff-collection>.

interesting visual component of the project. But I think my vision has changed a lot because my relationship to Judaism has changed so much since this project began.

**RDC:** These hybrid bodies, such as the Jewish body as bug or the Jewish body as vermin, come from antisemitic propaganda, such as the objects you've seen in the Schlaff Collection in the Jewish Museum. Can you describe some of the images your art references in the Jewish Museum's collection?

**RRKS:** I've spent most of my research in their collection of 511 postcards. These postcards really struck me because, as an object, a postcard serves as a simple form of communication, an innocent way of interacting with someone you care about. And yet, each piece in the collection is so blunt in its expression of racism. It's jarring to see cheery greetings on the back of a cartoon of a homeless Jewish merchant with a nose too big for his face.

Pretty soon in my research, I discovered that the creatures equated with Jewish bodies on the postcards drew interesting parallels with Jewish laws of kashrut. The creators of hate imagery strategically used animals that are unclean and foods that are forbidden to Jews, such as pork and shellfish or rats. Many of these caricatures involve pigs, which make for an ideal double-whammy of insult; pigs are not only filthy and un-kosher, but they're also considered greedy and gluttonous. The use of swine reflects both behavioral stereotypes and visual ones. The creators of antisemitic images use sacred ideology against the Jewish body as a form of humiliation. It's just disturbing that a father would send his daughter a card to express his love, illustrated with Jews running from SS members carrying bats.

**RDC:** The postcards seem so quotidian and playful, and yet they're charged with such virulent antisemitism, when it's meant to be a quick and easy, "Thinking of you. Love, Dad"

**RRKS:** Yes, you see plenty of "Happy New Year!" or "Greetings from Slovakia" . . . I think this juxtaposition made the images more interesting for me and, at the same time, totally nauseating.

**RDC:** I think that many people would assume this hate imagery comes primarily from the Nazi era, from the late '30s or early '40s, but that's not the case. What are the other sources that these images come from?

**RRKS:** Most of the work that I'm looking at does come from Europe, particularly Poland and Russia. It's more interesting for me to see the work that inspired Nazi ideology, rather than the work from the Third Reich produced under Joseph Goebbels, which we're more commonly aware of. In the archives, I'm mostly looking at images produced at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century. The collection doesn't concern itself with contemporary politics, so some of my visual research also comes from online archives with more contemporary material. Specifically, Ben Garrison's cartoons and contemporary propaganda in Arab newspapers.

A lot of Judeophobic visual sentiments can be found in medieval and early modern Christian manuscripts, some classical paintings of Jesus, and many portrayals of old testament stories. For instance, depictions of Jesus's circumcision make for very opportune creative license to explore distasteful Jewish caricatures. All of these I've had to source elsewhere, but the scope of the Schlaff Collection has driven this project from the beginning.



**Figure 1**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus I*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.





**Figure 2**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus II*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.



**Figure 3**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus III*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.

The collection acknowledges that antisemitism existed far before Hitler came to power. I really appreciate that the Jewish Museum concerns itself with a history much broader than just the Holocaust. It chooses to celebrate Vienna as a city rich with Jewish history without having such a narrow scope as many other Jewish institutions do.

**RDC:** Clearly, your work connects to this longer history of hate imagery, but it also addresses the rise of nationalism and antisemitic attacks in our present. Could you discuss your *Exodus* Series and its relationship to history or time?

**RRKS:** I wanted the time to be ambiguous because I'm not speaking to one story, but rather the many histories that seem to be in repetition. The Jewish narrative has been fairly consistent. As a people we've been wandering without place for millennia. So, time is important because it allows me to connect all of these instances of displacement and summates the entire story visually in one giant migration of characters and creatures that share my face and my body. Each composition in the *Exodus* series broadly represents a moment of transition, escape, and involuntary movement.

That being said, I've chosen to keep clothing and hairstyles ambiguous, and the objects and merchandise vary in period. Therefore, none of the visual aspects feel limited to a specific moment. Instead, I'm choosing to speak to the ceaseless nature of Jewry in society; an entire generalized experience. And in doing so, I use my body as a consistent protagonist.

The title refers to the story of Moses, the first tale of Jewish exile from Egypt to Israel. The story is an emblem of Jewish resilience that we retell every year over Passover. Passover has been a contentious holiday throughout Christian history, because of its overlap with Easter. Around this time of year, Jewish people were more likely to be accused of blood libel and the murder of gentiles for ritual sacrifice. Under certain circumstances, the fear was so heightened that Jews were forbidden from leaving their ghettos during the week of Easter. These blatant expressions of Judeophobia make our exodus story far more poignant and timely each year. On Passover we celebrate our survival and honor our origin story. Through my series I'm illustrating that this idea of exodus is the state of Jewish existence, emotionally and physically. Transition and assimilation are familiar to the Jewish people. With ink and pen, I'm depicting this liminal space that is neither static nor stable, but mobile and universal. We can't change the past, so I'm reclaiming it as foundational to our strength as a community.

**RDC:** In our conversations after the shooting, you were concerned that the work you were doing here, investigating this antisemitic imagery, may actually be contributing to the perpetuation of these stereotypes. How are you dealing with this concern? How has your perspective on your project changed after the Tree of Life synagogue shooting or after reconnecting with Judaism in Vienna?

**RRKS:** Before the shooting, I assumed antisemitism wasn't at the forefront of America's issues any longer. I assumed this project would mirror more pressing issues like racial discrimination more broadly and xenophobia at the border. So, I really felt like my responsibility was to speak to the generalized Other, instead of the specifically Jewish body. But when the shooting happened, I realized that the broader context of contemporary racism is *rooted* in the legacy of antisemitism. I proceeded to read about the history of antisemitism as a lingering sentiment, something that lies beneath and only resurfaces when democracy feels threatened. One quote I encountered in my research really stuck out to me. It was from Pilar Rahola, a Catalan journalist: "Jews are democracy's canaries: they live and die to the

extent that liberty lives or dies.”<sup>20</sup> After spending so much time with images of Jews associated with animals, I appreciated this metaphor as something empowering and redemptive. Jews have always been the easy scapegoat and will continue to be a target for people who feel insecure in their social and political environment. And yet, I’m still stunned when I see Judeophobia in the twenty-first century. I just don’t know how a person could see *my family* as a threat to their freedom. This complexity is exciting to navigate in my work.

Directly after the shooting, I remember feeling guilty, like my artwork wasn’t productive enough in criticizing white supremacist constructions of the Jewish image in Western society. I was afraid that my project could be interpreted negatively if seen by the wrong eyes, and in an uninformed context. At the time, my project was only just beginning, and I was initially recreating and copying the material I was coming across. As a Jewish person, I felt I was allowed to do so. But suddenly, this practice just felt wrong. So that’s when I shifted the narrative I was attempting to tell. Instead of playing with Jewish tropes, I started exploring the culture itself and the traditions that have set us apart from the beginning. This would be the only way I could reform people’s perceptions of Jews. So, rather than reproducing these hybrid bodies, I started this *Exodus* series, which recasts the story of the eternally wandering Jew as evidence of Jewish perseverance, not weakness.

**RDC:** So, you moved from recreating this hate imagery that could be used for nefarious purposes into a more critical practice?

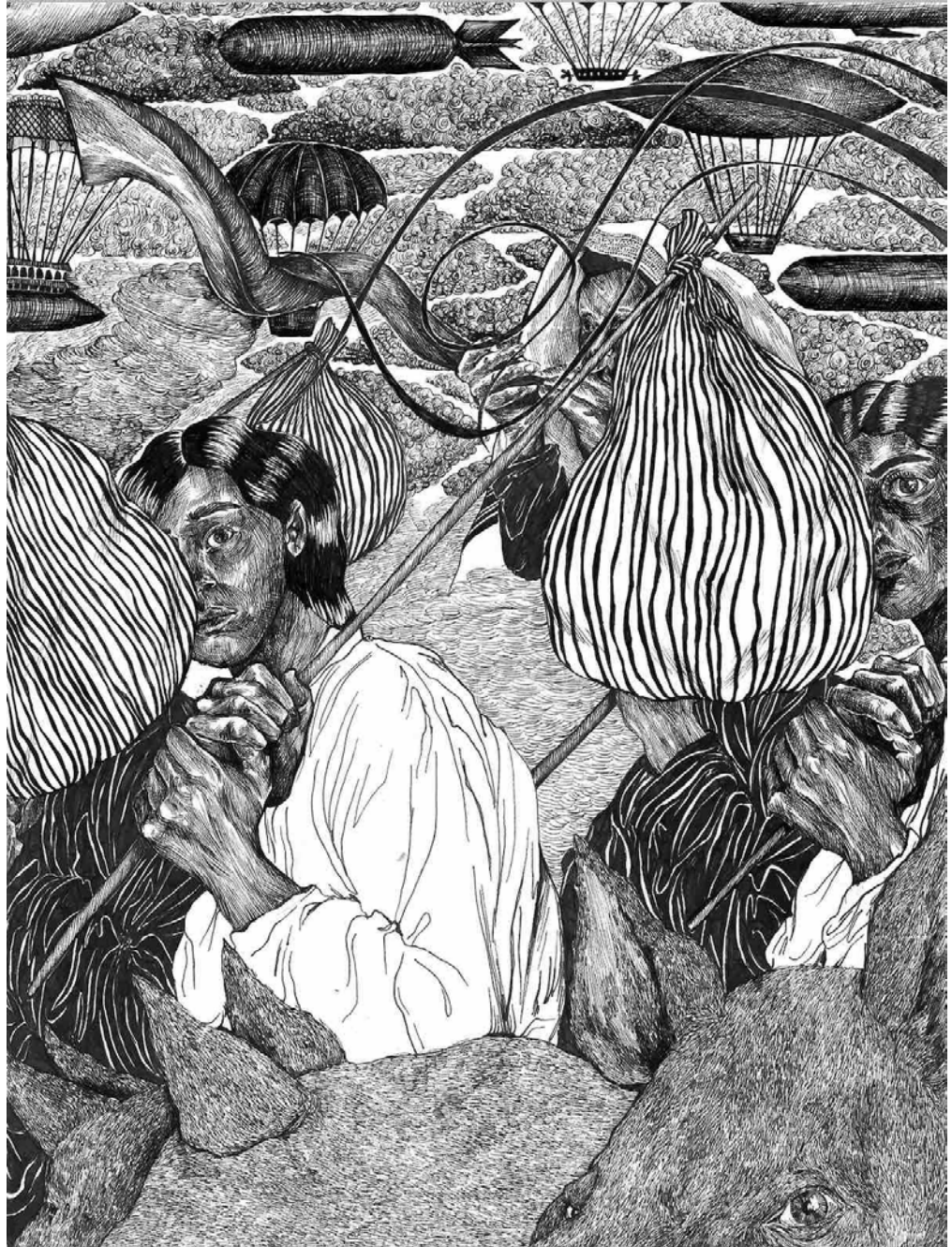
**RRKS:** Exactly. The shooting made my work feel more relevant, which in turn brought on an increasing amount of pressure to work through all of this material in the “correct” way.

And clearly this project carries a totally different weight in Austria. I feel this additional sense of accountability for my imagery, because the Jewish population in Vienna today is tiny, and so often I find myself speaking to an adult who had never met another Jewish person before me. I feel this heavy responsibility to do my culture justice in a place where there’s hardly any representation in the first place. I learned very quickly that most of what people know about Jews originates within the context of the Holocaust. People should know antisemitism didn’t start with Hitler and Judaism didn’t end with the Holocaust.

**RDC:** In this series that’s ostensibly focused on a history of discrimination against a group of humans, fauna appear again and again. What do the animals in your drawings signify for you?

**RRKS:** Each animal signifies something very different and very specific. The first drawing I finished was inspired by the quote about Jews being the canaries of democracy. I wanted to humanize the Jew while including them in the same composition as the animals they’re compared to. In the first drawing, *Exodus #1 (Canary)*, most of the canaries are dead, hanging from the ceiling or stuffed in a bag that’s held by the humanized Jew, who is standing and staring at the viewer. Two live canaries are placed in the foreground, and also stare directly at the viewer. And while these birds have suspiciously nose-like beaks, the two humans have been drawn noseless, as their faces have been conveniently covered by their surroundings.

<sup>20</sup> Pilar Rahola, “‘Democracy’s Canaries’: Jews and Judeophobia in Contemporary Europe” (lecture, the World Jewish Conference, June 13, 2005), [http://www.pilarrahola.com/3\\_0/CONFERENCIAS/default.cfm?ID=116](http://www.pilarrahola.com/3_0/CONFERENCIAS/default.cfm?ID=116). Quoted in Phyllis Goldstein and Harold Evans, *A Convenient Hatred: The History of Antisemitism*. (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, 2012), 348.



**Figure 4**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus IV*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.



**Figure 5**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus V*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.



**Figure 6**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus VI*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.



**Figure 7**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus VII*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.



I didn't want to draw Jews with big noses anymore; I wanted to flip the script. Or rather, rewrite the script to make these associations a little bit more ambiguous. After this initial drawing, I decided to explore other recurring animal relationships that I'd found in my research. For instance, dogs show up very often in the Schlaff Collection. There are several images of Jews living on the street trying to fight off stray street dogs with their umbrellas. Dogs seem to embody a protection of white ideals, especially since they were used by the Nazis to intimidate and police Jews. Chickens are important to Jewish food tradition and, in the ritual of kapparot, chickens are swung above a Jewish person's head on Yom Kippur as a form of atonement. This is seen as inappropriate and off-putting for many non-Jews, but I like playing with concepts of morality in the context of religious tradition. I used camels to represent the exodus out of Egypt. They're common in illustrations of the exile in the desert and helped take some of the load during travel. I used cows because they were important livestock and trading objects for Jewish communities in the countryside. Many Jews were involved in financial dealings with farmers and were often accused of usury and illegal activity in this business, which contributed to rural antisemitism.

There are so many animals that come up in the Schlaff Collection, and by integrating a different creature in each drawing, the series becomes a diverse ecosystem. Each animal serves as a distinct marker of both place and time as Jews are a vast and diverse community spanning continents. Each individual animal plays an important supporting role, acting as both brethren and means of survival. At times it's unclear whether the humans are leading the animals or vice versa. Then eventually I started to wonder where they're all going. That's when I thought about Noah's Ark as a story that reflects this idea of Jewish salvation. Noah was told by God to save himself, his family, and every living species in the world. So, if we apply the Judeophobic legacy of equating the Jewish body with that of the animal, then perhaps this can be interpreted as a story of our own survival. Incorporating both the animal and the human into the same composition allows for a completely new kind of relationship to flourish, one that reexamines hierarchies, status, and relational Otherness. I like the idea of Jew and beast seeking refuge together, but I don't feel it's necessary to include an ending to the narrative of the series. Because we don't yet have an ark, so to speak. Jews are still struggling to feel safe and, in my opinion, we're still in search of the "homeland," so the *Exodus* series exists in a timeless purgatory. Ultimately, what the fauna and the Jews in the series all have in common is that they are underestimated and resilient, living quietly, without burdening society.

**RDC:** It's interesting to take up the aspersion of Jews as *less* than human and subvert that by referencing Noah's Ark and, therefore, the salvation of the Jewish people. As you mentioned, you include self-portraiture in the images. Would you say autobiography or your family's history plays a role in this series?

**RRKS:** Yes, many of the images I've been looking at conjure personal memories, and a lot of the caricatures of older Jewish men remind me of my Zayde, my grandfather. I was raised by my Zayde. He was a retired orthodox rabbi, and he lived with me all throughout my childhood. He made sure I got a wholesome conservative education at my Jewish elementary school. We would light candles every Friday night for Shabbat and observe the holidays together in synagogue. Thankfully, he never force-fed me faith, but he did hope that my studies would deepen my connection with my culture. Shortly before my Zayde passed away, I graduated from my Jewish day school. This is when I started attending a secular high school and, as a family, we stopped lighting candles on Shabbat. I disassociated from Judaism altogether because I felt like it was too restrictive and structured for my teenage taste. When I went to art school, I decided to attend services on Yom Kippur, our holiest day of the year. At first it felt like an obligation, but upon walking into synagogue I realized that I had never voluntarily entered a Jewish space before. And I had never gone to temple completely alone. But as soon as I entered, I recognized the sounds and the people and the music. I had just

started my adult life in a new city. I felt so homesick and alone, but in that moment, I suddenly felt connected to something larger than myself. It was a really powerful moment, and I promised myself from that day forward, that Yom Kippur would be my one Jewish day a year.

My art practice at the time was focused on my female body rather than my Jewish one. Eventually this interest extended into an interest in bodies that transform into something magical and otherworldly and I began to construct my own mythologies surrounding my body.

When I came across anti-Jewish imagery online, I started to identify with my Jewishness again. This imagery suddenly felt like an attack on my own identity, and that is when I felt impassioned. Judaism is something I'd disowned for so long, but when I saw these grotesque interpretations of Jewry, I deeply identified with the bodies – bodies that are ambiguous and fantastical and misunderstood.

So, it is important to me that I use my body as a reference for the subjects in the *Exodus* series. This project is more than just an investigation of stereotypes, it's a personal exploration of my cultural identity, and, as such, I can only speak to my own experience as a white Ashkenazi woman. My personal family history is inherently implicated in this series, but I'm also using this series as a platform to extend the definition of family to anyone who shares my blood.

Throughout this project, I've been thinking a lot about the many facets of blood, as a concept and a biological principle. If you have Judaism in your (mother's) blood, then you're considered a Jewish person, regardless of religious belief. So, blood, in this case, is an integral part of Jewish identity. On the other hand, blood is considered dirty, and all meats must be cleansed of blood in order to be consumed according to Kosher law. Jews also have a rich history of being accused of blood libel, and many have been murdered for purportedly engaging in blood rituals for the sake of making matzah and wine. So, while blood is the very essence that connects many Jews together, it's still this contentious and awkward substance that reminds us of our struggle.

**RDC:** In these self-portraits you often depict yourself as androgynous or, in some cases, in the guise of a male rabbi. Why do you represent your own body in this way? How does gender figure into the series?

**RRKS:** In the beginning of the fellowship year, I was only representing the male Jewish body because it seems that the male figure embodies the easily recognizable convention of what a Jewish person looks like. Even when women are represented in the context of antisemitic caricature, they're portrayed with very masculine features and exaggerated facial and body hair. When one is asked to imagine a Jewish person, many people visualize a Jewish man with a big hat, big nose, a long beard, and payos. But pretty soon I realized that I was limiting the Jewish experience to only one kind of body.

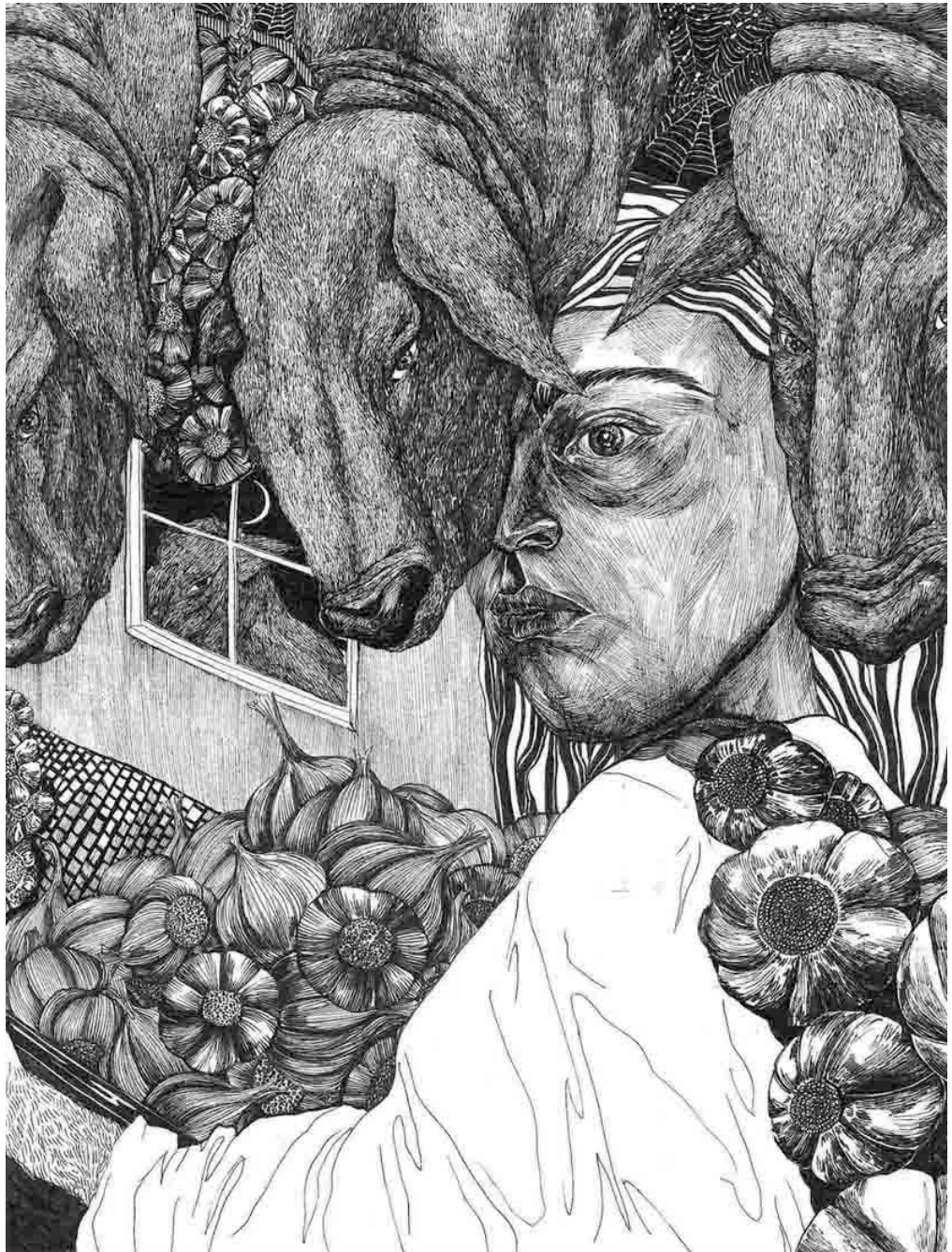
So, when I started the *Exodus* series, I used my own body as a way to loosen the gender binary of the Jewish body and include women or androgynous Jews. The female body is rarely represented in the Schlaff Collection, so this series serves as a reminder that Jewish identity is independent of gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. One cannot look more "Jewish" than another, because Jews exist all over the world.

But in drawing my own body into these histories, I'm implicating myself in the vast network of perpetually exiled Jews, regardless of gender. I like twisting gender by using my own body and exaggerating these male stereotypes into absurdity. The juxtaposition of a female face wearing a black hat throws off all conventions and calls into question the inherent assumptions that exist surrounding the Jew.



**Figure 8**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus VIII*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.



**Figure 9**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus IX*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.



**Figure 10**

Rosabel Rosalind Kurth-Sofer, *Exodus VIII*, 2018. Pen and ink on paper. 9x11 inches.

When I decided to use my body as a reference, I had to confront the question of the Jewish nose. I very consciously attempted to cover the figures' noses as often as I could because I wanted to draw attention to the less explicit cultural stereotypes, like the objects they hold and the actions they engage in.

**RDC:** The absence of the nose is not something I noticed right away because your compositions are so dense with pen work. Do you do preparatory sketches in pencil? What was your method for creating this series?

**RRKS:** My method doesn't require planning; most of my decision making is instinctual. I draw a rough sketch in pencil before I start. It's important that I engage a strong foreground, middle ground, and background to create a sense of depth. Dimensionality is always difficult to attain in a pen drawing. So, it takes a certain degree of planning to make sure the compositions are organized, while still allowing for complexity.

**RDC:** You've mentioned a few times the complexity of your compositions. But upon first seeing these images, I was struck by your play with positive and negative space. There are expanses void of marks and they provide moments of relief from your otherwise quite dense mark-making. Could you talk more about the form of your drawings?

**RRKS:** Within these chaotic visual narratives, the voids allow for visual breathing room. They highlight a symbolic emptiness, and a contrast to the chaos that comes with picking up and migrating to somewhere new. This series really helped me comb through the vast catalogue of visual stereotypes and create a concrete collection for myself. I've incorporated different tropes that recur in the Schlaff Collection and have come up with my own illustrated library of caricature. I specifically draw from the recurring scenes of the Jew surrounded by or carrying junk, which speaks to a history of collecting, trading, and presumed saving. These chaotic spaces create ample opportunities to engage a combination of Judaic symbolism and anti-Jewish fantasies. In the compositions, I incorporate the Seder plate and the Western Wall, the Hebrew clock and the menorah. This creates interesting contrasts to the Jew wearing multiple hats, carrying luggage, selling garlic, wheeling giant merchandise, dragging bags of money and other junk. The mythology that I'm creating gives in to the antisemite's fantasy of Jewish materialism, but it turns it on its head in such a way that it is outweighed by Jewish struggle. The viewer empathizes with the Jewish resistance, rather than the anti-Jewish sentiments. So nearly every detail in each composition comes from work I've seen in the collection and in my research.

**RDC:** Would you say the density of your compositions reflects this idea of excess and the stereotype of excess for Jews, as in Jews that are hoarding money, Jews that are hoarding these objects they're selling on their bodies, or carrying their lives with them in suitcases?

**RRKS:** Yes, for a long time in many parts of the world, Jewish people were constrained to a lifestyle of trading and selling goods. So, in the Schlaff Collection I was seeing a lot of illustrations of Jewish people sitting on the side of the road, selling junk on the sidewalk, or carrying bundles of belongings, or cheating young boys out of the money in their pockets. Jewish people would be depicted carrying around these carts or boxes hanging around their necks, with half a dozen hats piled on their heads, desperate for a buck. None of these objects were special or precious. But it's clear that the bodies themselves manifest the junk that they were trying to sell, stuff that no one really wants. It is a stereotype that exists today, that

Jews are assumed to save money well in the hopes of becoming rich and powerful. But Jews collect more than money. We collect stories and hold on to objects that contain memories. That's what this is all about.

When I bring these stereotypes to light, viewers have the opportunity to acknowledge their own preconceived notions. That's a really exciting side-effect of this series, when people recognize these stereotypes and have become familiar with these visual conventions. If Jewish stereotypes feel familiar to you, then you've been affected by antisemitism.

The fear and hatred of Jews lingers in sometimes the most unexpected places. We can't keep writing off contemporary Jewish oppression as trivial. It's important that we stand in solidarity with other discriminated people, people of color, people in the LGBTQIA community, Jewish or gentile, to fight the injustice that burdens the Others of society. The *Exodus* story is a story that every Other can connect with in some regard.



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